

# Women's Institute makes a commitment

Despite an aging membership, the Institute's new president says there is a new vibrancy in the group that wasn't always there in the past

The Women's Institute lives by the motto "An Organization for Personal Growth and Community Action."

And according to its newest provincial president, never have those words been truer than they are right now. Marg Harris took over the reigns in November and for the next two years she will guide an organization of volunteers who are ready and willing to be at the forefront of political and social change.

The Women's Institute has a long history; its centennial is in 1997. It has seen many changes since it was first established primarily as a social organization for rural housewives. Since then it has evolved and grown, and it now boasts approximately 14,500 members with 834 branches province-wide.

Most of the women who are involved in the Women's Institute are long-standing members. Harris, in fact, recently received her 25 year lifetime membership.

The member of the South Lobo branch has held many positions including treasurer, Tweedsmuir curator, president of the Middlesex North district and board director from subdivision 21. She also sat on the women in taxation committee.

So even though it began as a "frivolous comment" she let her name stand for the provincial presidency, believing she had the capabilities to do the job. Others must have believed it too, because she was elected to the position.

It's not a commitment she takes lightly. Being president means serving a two-year term as president-elect, followed by two years as president and then two years as past-president. But Harris says she doesn't find the prospect the least bit daunting; she's been through much tougher times.

She was widowed years ago when her husband, who worked for Master Feeds, died of complications from appendicitis while working in Trinidad. Harris returned to Canada with six children to raise, and she did so with the help of friends and family.

She says she has since been blessed with a second husband whom the good Lord sent her way "while her eyesight was still good enough to see him coming."

During her term there will be much to do, not the least of which is the 100th anniversary celebration, scheduled for June 1997 in Hamilton. Although the anniversary is an important one, Harris says it won't detract from the many projects the Women's Institute has in store.

"We can't lose sight of the important things we do," she says. That includes an on-going theme launched in 1995 and expected to be carried on for several years entitled "Safe and Healthy Communities."

**JENNIFER WALKER**

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The Women's Institute is expected to tackle several issues based on this theme including the Young Offenders Act, rural health care (including health care for seniors) and the use of BST.

"Our main wish is to provoke thought. Our purpose is to inform people of the resources available within our communities and to enthuse groups who share common concerns to participate and to work with one another," Harris says. "What we try to do is offer support rather than doing it all ourselves."

If there is one area that needs improving within the organization it's promotion. "The Women's Institute has always been forward in their thinking and heavily involved in situations that need care and attention. We have seen a need and gone quietly about trying to change it," according to Harris.

Some of those changes have included lobbying for fences around manure pits, using SMV (slow moving vehicle) signs properly, using blue boxes for recycling and advocating living wills, says Mary Janes, public relations officer for the province.

Janes also points out that the Women's Institute has strongly supported 4-H programs through the years. "The Women's Institute is one of the greatest supporter of 4-H," says Janes.

But while the quiet change and support has helped to accomplish much, more is needed to give the organization's profile a boost. Harris says she feels it's about time they were more vocal about the work they accomplish.

"We need to be more vocal about being proud of the work we do. There are so many wonderful women involved in the Women's Institute, they are just masters at volunteering. We do things so well except for the marketing aspect which maybe we haven't done as well."

**IT HAS BEEN** that lack of promotion that has seen some branches fold in recent years, while others have been teetering on the edge. "The obvious change is that the membership is getting older. That is definitely a negative aspect. We're going to be in a bit of trouble without younger members," says Janes.

But with the addition four years ago of a membership coordinator, Harris says the situation is looking better. Still, the bottom line is that as the existing membership continues to age, there is a lack of younger women waiting to assume their roles.

The younger women have been reluctant to join, says Harris, and it's understandable. With schedules already crammed full there is very little time for volunteer organizations. But Harris says the Women's Institute can fill a gap for young women.

While mothers, aunts and grandmothers used to be around to provide much-needed support and advice, that



**Marg Harris**

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